

Mixing Fun, Learning

Parents Can Use ‘Teaching Moments’ During Vacations

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BY SUSAN NOBLE

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For sheer excitement, it is hard to beat the looks on the faces of children on the last day of school. All the possibilities of summer are just a bell away. The second hand sweeps upward, followed by two-dozen pairs of anxious eyes. The bell rings, and at long last, the school year closes.

While summer means fun and freedom from desks and homework, it should not mark a holiday from learning. In fact, the summer sun offers parents an opportunity to shine as their children’s first and primary teachers.

Now, I know what you may be thinking: There goes that lady from the Board of Education trying to slip a copy of the Standards of Learning into the beach basket. Is nothing sacred? Is there no escape from the SOLs?

But please read on. As a parent, I know the importance of vacation. Kids and families need an extended break from the routines and rigors of the school year. Summer is a time for making memories – not grades.

All I am suggesting is that parents should be aware of the many “teaching moments” that occur during the course of summer vacation. By making the most of these moments, parents can feed their children’s natural curiosity. By cultivating curiosity, parents help their children develop into willing learners while at the same time forging the bonds that are formed through shared discoveries and meaningful conversations.

A drive to the beach provides a great example of how conversation can lay the groundwork for academic success. A stimulating view usually will prompt a child in the back seat to put down his video game and ask a question, such as “What is this tunnel we’re about to go through?”

A parent could say, “Oh, it’s just a tunnel under a river on the way to the beach.” The child then is likely to go right back to his game. After all, if mom and dad don’t think the scene rolling by is worth talking about, why should he?

But what if mom or dad responds by describing how the tunnel goes under Hampton Roads and how this body of water marks the confluence of the Chesapeake Bay, the James River, and the Atlantic Ocean. And how if you look over to the right, you can see some of the ships of the Atlantic fleet. And over there, to the left, see that big ship with all of the boxes? That’s a container ship. It brings things to Virginia all the way over the ocean – who knows, maybe it even passed through the Panama Canal.

This kind of conversation builds curiosity. One question leads to another. Mom causally passes a map to the backseat so the child can see how it all fits together. The video game is forgotten momentarily while the child's understanding of his surroundings is broadened.

After a few minutes, the child's curiosity is satisfied, and he's back to blasting clones. Mom and dad don't push. They know that there will be more "teaching moments" on the way. That island over there? That's Roanoke Island. You'll learn about that next year in the fourth grade. What's the big deal about Roanoke Island? Well, about 400 years ago...

The key is to take advantage of moments when children display curiosity and not to be discouraged if they seem unimpressed with your answers or lose interest in the conversation. The seeds planted during summer vacation will sprout in the fall. A lesson on the regions of Virginia will trigger memories of a ride to the beach. Learning is enhanced because the child approaches the subject with a foundation of knowledge and personal experience.

Virginia, of course, offers seemingly endless opportunities for day trips and weekend getaways that can provide fun and educational experiences. Trips to Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown, and the Frontier Culture Museum develop a concept of history in young children and prepare them for future learning. While you may want to view every exhibit, remember you can always go back. Don't expect a child to be able (or willing) to absorb everything. It's summer – family and fun should come first.

The goal is to provide experiences that will give children a frame of reference for future learning. Think of the disadvantage of a child whose thoughts and experiences are confined to the here and now. The idea that what exists or existed beyond the limits of day-to-day living is worth knowing may seem strange to this child. If parents display little interest in anything other than their immediate concerns and wants, knowledge for their children is just "all that stuff the teachers make us learn in school."

Expanding a child's horizons doesn't necessarily require burning a tank of gas. And a parent doesn't have to possess a college education to encourage curiosity. All it takes is a willingness to listen and answer the inevitable "why's" of childhood. And if you don't have the answer to a question your child asks, find it together. There is time for this in summer.

(Susan T. Noble, an elementary-school principal, and a member of the State Board of Education, is a 2002 Commentary Columnist)